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Interconnectedness: The Roots of Inspiration

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Abstract

This paper explores the question of: Why is nature so inspiring? Ultimately the answer is that we are connected to and a part of a greater system. It is through nurturing this relationship with the Earth that we can be inspired. Our western culture has created a dichotomy between human and nature. As problematic as this is, our humanity is reflected back at us and can be a source of inspiration. Our desire to explore the unknown comes from our humanity. When faced with nature we can be taken into a state of awe where preconceived mental frameworks need to be adjusted, thus making an entry point for inspiration. Our sense of wonder and curiosity about the world is relative to scientific endeavors and helps facilitate inspiration. Nature in its purest form serves as a great source of inspiration for the arts. Some songs, masterpieces, and poems are direct reflections on nature. When we see something amazing in nature, it can inspire designers to express their creativity. Artistic endeavors make a great platform to express the relationship between the planet and ourselves.

Keywords: inspiration, nature, creativity, awe, wonder, anthropocentric, humanity

What is inspiration? It is not something that we can grab and hold on to, or keep safe next to us at night. I believe they are the intangible dreams that smack us in the face when introduced to something spectacular. Inspiration is described as having three distinct parts (Thrash & Elliot 2004; Thrash et al. 2014): transcendence or the realization of a new possibilities, that is received from interaction with an external source and comes with the motivation to make new possibilities come to life. This is known as tripartite conceptualization. Throughout conversations and informal discussions I have become extremely interested in inspiration. Where does it come from? How does it manifest? Why do we each experience it differently? This complex idea is the cornerstone for amazing ingenuity, great works of art and influence in our society.

Throughout this paper I try to answer the following question: Why is nature so inspiring? That being a rather large question to tackle, I will only explore three avenues although there are probably more out there to explore. I propose that we become inspired by nature through our connection to it thus experiencing several realms where inspiration can take place. Our cultural denial of interconnectedness with nature results in a contrast between humans and nature. This contrast exposes within our humanity the virtue of curiosity - inspiration's first cousin. When we feel connected and full of wonder or awe another pathway for inspiration



alights in us. Through experiencing this relationship with nature we are imbued with creativity that aspires to self-expression resulting in wonderful and diverse works of art.

Connection

A timeless, limitless, perfect unity underlies all our feeling and thought, underlies every form of existence and every part of ourself. We know this through a deep, inner awareness for which we can give no explanation or proof, because it is itself the source of all knowledge, proof, and explanation. Depending on our degree of personal development, this awareness in us may be obscure or clear” Carl Gustav Carus, Nine letters on landscape painting, 1815-1824 (Gamwell, 2002, pg. 21).

The connection between humans and the Earth is the most important relationship. We should be humbled as a species that lives on this planet because humans fully depend on it for life (and currently cannot find this elsewhere) whereas if the entire species were to be wiped out, the Earth would continue existing (Lee, 1994; Armstrong, 2012). It does not depend on us; humans are a mere blip on its lifetime. The Earth serves as our house and home, our lifeblood and mother, without which we would not even exist. The connection we have, and the role we play in the greater ecosystem has become a challenge.

In western culture we have become separated, we don't view ourselves as part of the system but instead as an agent with authority over our surroundings. Moran (2009) so eloquently describes the current condition of our culture: “The dichotomy between people and the physical environment is deeply embedded in Western thought and in Western religions – a dichotomy that to this day influences our choices and actions – and that seems to facilitate a view that treats the environment as external to our being and subject to control and domination” (pp. 24). He highlights how we have become disconnected from nature. We are socialized to learn that nature is separate from ourselves and that we as individuals are more important and hold greater needs than the other, i.e. nature. It becomes engrained in us to manipulate and dominate landscapes for human gain, without thinking how we are damaging our connection and relationship with the world.

Our modern culture has stopped being harmonious with the environment. Instead of living as part of nature we continue to develop ways to try and beat it. However when we push away from society and take in nature, those are the moments when the inspiration of nature shines through. Scenes throughout nature are impossible to recreate with human hands, we feel a sense of awe from the balanced ecosystems and immense natural structures. These moments strike back to create a balance between human society and the nature of being a human animal. Wilson's (1984) biophilia hypothesis proposes that humans feel an instinct to connect with other living systems.

We know that we are interconnected and in many ways we seek to explore this relationship and connect to the natural, living world around us. Coming from within, we can learn to nurture this relationship.

Humanity

The beauty in this dichotomy is that we are able to see our own humanity. Seeing other people connect with nature and tearing down the culturally constructed wall that separates us is an inspiring act. Watching others embrace Wilderness with curiosity and bravery not only inspires us as humans but can help mend our broken relationship and reconnect with nature.

As Thoreau (1950) reminds us, "I went in to the woods because I wished to live deliberately..." (pp. 81). Our experiences in nature give us space to reflect on ourselves. What sparks us to go deeper into the woods? I believe it is our insatiable appetite for exploration. Our curiosity and wonder pushes us to be brave and take risks in previously unknown places. If we look at famous explorers throughout history like Darwin in the Galapagos, Lewis, Clarke & Sacagawea in the Northwest, and Neil Armstrong on the moon, we are reminded how truly small we are compared to the expanse of the universe and the marvels of the world around us. Their journals and findings are pieces of natural history and science that have inspired so many others to explore.

The vast immensity that is the planet Earth is a gift, one that humans are entrusted with. Seeing and experiencing huge landscapes has a significant impact on our perception of the world around us. Even encounters with animals or experiencing Wilderness can stir up human emotions of inspiration and desire for connection with the land. William Cronon (1996) writes about the cultural romanticization of wilderness and how the "frontier" attitude creates a paradox within Wilderness. If we as humans designate land to be left untrammled and pristine yet use it recreationally, our presence defies our own definition of Wilderness. The construct of Wilderness becomes problematic. Many of the reasons why people seek out Wilderness areas are for solitude and communion with nature in whatever form that takes. Cronon (1996) tells us, "Learning to honor the wild - learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other - means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions," (pg. 25). To be aware of our surroundings and ourselves brings us into mindfulness.

Being mindful of the power that is this planet, that it is its own entity and plays by its own rules, is a big step. Acknowledging the capability that it has and the sovereignty it stands for is inspirational to me. When I spend time thinking about how immense this planet it and our existence on it in time relative to the universe combined with the great mysteries this planet holds, it brings me to a state of wonder and awe that creates a different type of inspiration.

Awe and Sense of Wonder

Frequently in conversations a great friend of mine reminds me at times to, “sit back and ride the world” (K. Darsow, personal communication, 2014) in order to become grounded and to enjoy what the world has to present. By considering where I am at in the grand scheme of the universe taps into the part of my mind where infinite possibilities live. Those possibilities serve as a source of inspiration. How can we encapsulate this feeling with words? Keekok Lee describes this well:

In its presence [Nature], we humans should be filled with awe, that is, with reverential fear and wonder. Wonder is called for as the thing we behold is so marvelous and remarkable. And reverential fear, because not only is Nature a marvel but also because it has power over us, as on it our very existence depends (pp. 94).

This feeling awe is not a daily occurrence. It is a deep emotion that can leave us struck without the proper words to describe how we are feeling or what thoughts are racing through our mind. Experiencing awe in reference to nature reveals our true connectedness. Why else would be struck with awe when faced with the power of Earth? Awe can be experienced as a response to beautiful scenery, vast landscapes and vistas or when one comes to the realization of how infinitesimal each human is in comparison to nature (Keltner & Haidt, 2003).

When poised at a grand vista we begin to think of ourselves as small and see the world around us for how truly immense it is. Within that immensity lives infinite possibility and therefore an ingredient of inspiration. Included in this thought is the fact that we are humans, here and present on our planet. Armstrong (2012) argues that in order for us to fully accept the intrinsic value of nature we must also reject the anthropocentric values which separate us from nature. This is another step in preparing the mind for inspiration: seeking out that which holds possibilities and mending the human relationship with nature so that those possibilities become ever more present.

“Fleeting and rare, experiences of awe can change the course of a life in profound and permanent ways” (Kaltner & Haidt, 2003). The experience of awe can lead to wonder. Being totally engrossed and amazed with a vista often leads to the question of, “How in the heck did this happen?” When we are faced with new and amazing information we become curious of how it came to be. The power of awe opens your mind to possibilities you had not previously considered – a key ingredient in inspiration. Our amazement fades to curiosity and suddenly we begin to question. This leads us to wonder.

The state of wonder is miraculous; unbridled curiosity, pure inquiry, and the amazing power of the mind to seek the unknown. Yet for something that is so superb, why is it not celebrated more for it actually is? Nowadays, the term is not used in a

celebratory manner for the pure curiousness it envelops, but is acceptable when called Science. Wonder is the heart of science (Ball, 2012) and has influenced many great academics throughout time. Within an article, Ball (2012) includes many quotes, such as this one from physicist Richard Feynman, “ ‘a knowledge of science only adds to the excitement and mystery and awe of a flower.’ ” I agree with Feynman in that knowledge can make something commonplace or ordinary into the extraordinary with a little more wonder. If someone were to say, “Hmmm, I wonder what kind of flower that is...” they are expressing their curiosity and perhaps through this they are inspired to find the answer and look up the flower. Wonder opens us up to inspiration and facilitates the journey.

Yet oftentimes, wonder is akin to a childish notion and not given the recognition it deserves. Ball (2012) points this out in reference to the age of Enlightenment. Science was for the serious and wonder was amateur and childish. This is an ageist thing to say because children are sometimes the best scientists, coming into situations with little bias or agenda. One great example of wonder is Alice from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There* (1993). Within the story she continues to explore this new and mysterious world she stumbles upon with great curiosity. Just think, if we were all a little more like Alice, what things would we come to know that we hadn’t before?

Kathleen Dean Moore (1995) speaks about taking the time to poke around, to explore with joy the wonders around us and to be curious. This is how we can learn more about the world and ourselves: “Ideas, after all, start with sense impressions; and all learning comes from making connections among observations and ideas.... Everything interesting is complicated” (pp.36). Without wonder, we would not know what we do today. We would not have the technological advances or knowledge that our society is based upon. Without wondering about the moon, would we have ever sent humans to it? Many of our advances are due to wonder and curiosity and as such, we should strive to foster wonder in all people.

Wonder is a virtue that I hold in high regard because it helps to take the wisps of inspiration and turn them into more concrete ideas from which change can happen. Thrash & Elliot (2003) discovered that inspiration is more likely to come to those who are open minded and prepared for it. I believe that wonder helps facilitate this process. When you are curious about something, your mind is open and accepting new information. We may view or see something that sparks a curiosity and wonderment, and by following this strand of curiosity we can be inspired. By communing with the world around us and being curious we can be more open to inspiration.

Wonder and awe differ in that wonder is really curiosity, asking yourself questions, seeking to find unknown truths, while awe is amazement, bewilderment, astonishment at viewing a miraculous sight or receiving new information that is not easily adapted into our current way of knowing. “ ‘What’s cool about awe is that it literally blows your mind,’ ” in reference to how we must adjust our mental frames to accommodate new experiences and information (Abrahamson, 2012). Without wonder

and awe, we would not have as much inspiration. I feel that both serve as precursors to inspiration. Wonder by preparing the mind and awe as a grounding emotion from which our inspirations become realistic. One could be inspired in a way that is not realistic, but through awe of nature we see our connection here on earth and transform those ideas to suit the situation around us. Both help prepare us to reconnect with nature and become inspired. Wonder and awe are not necessary to be inspired, but can help facilitate the process.

Aesthetics & Creativity

Our wonder and amazement with the world results in immense creativity and self-expression. The influence of nature has helped to create many great works of art. From the earliest caveman with their primitive tools and paintings to modern technology; we have used the inspiration of nature around us for survival and self-expression. Not only does nature provide a source of inspiration for arts, but as Neil deGrasse Tyson (2004) tells us, our purposes and actions stem from our connection and relationship with the Earth:

Central to imitating the human condition is the need to explore our sense of place and purpose in the world. If the discoveries of science were detached from this calling, then one would never expect science to inspire creativity in artist, or more specifically, one would never expect art to reach for scientific themes (pp.6).

From music to painting, to writing and design, even scientific exploration and study – nature and our connection with it influences creative endeavors. Examples of this are so numerous and vast – just visit a nearby art museum or library and literally thousands of works have been inspired by nature. Nature may serve as the root of inspiration, but grows with wonder, awe, and curiosity; especially when paired with science. Bunske (1981) explored how the work of Alexander von Humboldt influenced Frederick E. Church’s art in the mid 19th century. During this time, both science and art were coming together and resulted in miraculous works of art that bare weight in scientific and ecological circles due to the detail and grandeur of what was re-created. Gamwell (2002) states, “The conceptual basis for both the art and the science from Kant to Einstein, was provided by the philosophy of German Idealism – a powerful vision of the unity of nature” (pp.10). The idea that we are connected and a part of nature becomes evident through works of art.

For example, if we look at Vincent van Gogh’s painting *The Starry Night* we see an interpretation of the night sky. There are a few buildings visible and some landscape but the real focal points are the stars in the sky and the swirly pattern created in the atmosphere. Revealed in letters to his brother van Gogh expressed a need or void in his life and the answer became to go out at night and paint what he saw (Gamwell, 2002).

The mystery of the night sky inspired this specific work, and now it is recognizable and appreciated nearly all over the world.

Other works express wonder with the natural world – like the song “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from *The Wizard of Oz*. This is another piece of art that is highly recognized and replicated. The lyrics themselves include reference to the sky and natural elements like rainbows, clouds, and blue birds (Arlen & Harburg, 1939). The meaning of the song is about accessing your hopes and dreams, following the aspiration inspired by nature. The song in itself is inspired by nature and has become an emblem of inspiration to other artists and everyday people.

Another example of inspiration from nature in art can be found in Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* (1964). This story chronicles the life of a boy and his beloved tree. Yet as he grows older he continually asks for more and more from the tree and does not give anything back in return. Where did his original love go? This story represents well our Western culture and the disconnect we have from nature, viewing it solely as a resource. However, when he was young it was clear how much he loved the tree and as he aged, he continually relied on it – just as we continue to rely on the Earth today. This story is inspired by a tree and demonstrates one relationship between the tree and a boy. This is just one example of writing and poetry that describes our relationship with nature and is inspired from it, but many more exist.

Laura Barnett (2012) interviewed a number of artists – choreographers, painters, composers, musicians, dancers, sculptors, and others in order to find out where their inspiration comes from. The results were so interesting to read because each person comes from a unique background and lifestyle, yet several collective themes arose from their responses. The feeling of inspiration does not come suddenly like a lightning bolt, but emerges slowly from being in the right state of mind. This helps support part of Thrash’s (2004) study of inspiration being more present in those who are mentally open to inspiration. Tamara Rojo, a ballet dancer comments that, “To be truly inspired you must learn to trust your instinct, and your creative empathy” (Barnett, 2012). These artists also cited connecting with nature as a source of inspiration. “Its very important for inspiration to go elsewhere: to move away from the city into pastoral settings, and to make space for meditation,” says artist Issac Julian (Barnett, 2012). All of these people work in fields of vast creativity and are expected to tap into that and be inspired. In a way, they are experts of inspiration –they *have* to be. And overwhelmingly their advice is to connect with nature, let ideas form slowly, and then you can express yourself.

However, the arts are facing barriers that disconnect people from self-expression. A 2005 report from RAND shows that despite increasing numbers, “the visual arts also tell a story of rapid, even seismic change, systemic imbalances, and dislocation. Indeed, the organizational ecology of the visual arts world has changed dramatically” (McCarthy, K. F., Ondaatje, E. H., Brooks, A., & Szanto, A. pp. 105). The report also states that art education helps to connect people to the world around them and lets students express their creative side. Art education offers students a chance to start discussions of ecological issues and lets the public think about fundamental difficulties

of culture and nature (Graham, 2007). By tapping into the creativity that nature provides us, we can learn to better express ourselves and nurture our relationship through engaging in the arts. One prime example of this is through journaling. Warkentin (2011) used a semester long nature journaling exercise to connect students to the outdoors in the middle of New York City. Despite expressions of skepticism from some students at the beginning, the activity itself enhanced study understanding of place through attentiveness and creative process.

Beyond journaling or visual arts, nature can influence design and function. The book *BioDesign* chronicles artists, engineers, architects, scientists and others work that is rooted in inspiration from nature. Paola Antonelli describes this as: “Biodesign harnesses living materials, whether they are cultured tissues or plants, and embodies the dream of organic design: watching objects grow and, after the first impulse, letting nature, the best among all engineers and architect, run its course” (2012, pp. 7). The most creative names in arts and industry are sourcing nature for inspiration and their products show how we are all connected in a system greater than ourselves. As Antonelli reminds us, nature is the greatest artist and innovator. As humans, we are socialized to imitate and recreate and as the common saying goes, “imitation is the greatest form of flattery.” Nature is our real and true source of inspiration. Through our connection and relationship with Earth we emulate its power and creativity through self-expression in the arts.

Conclusion

“And forget not that the earth delights to feel your bare feet and the winds long to play with your hair” – Kahlil Gibran, 2011, pp. 43

Humans are a small piece of a greater puzzle here on earth. Our ability to create and manipulate has been so influenced by our relationship with Earth. If we want to continue to be inspired by nature we need to learn to mend this connection and be open to its influence. Experiences of awe remind us of the power and possibilities on Earth. Maintaining a sense of wonder prepares the mind for inspiration and keeps us curious about the mysteries and unknowns in nature. Again, our connection to the Earth serves as inspiration for artists and self-expression. We can be inspired by the natural aesthetics that surrounds us, whether beautiful or not. This gift of inspiration that nature give us is one that we can use for its benefit, not just our own. It is an opportunity to give back, which helps strengthen our relationship with the planet Earth. Ultimately, if we wish to be inspired all we need to do is walk out our front door.



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